

Dialogue of the millennium

Labour internationally finds itself confronted by an apocalyptic beast with many different faces, names and guises. Unionists call this beast 'globalisation', 'neo-liberalism', 'structural adjustment', 'privatisation', 'mass unemployment'. What these reflect is the shift from a 'national/industrial/colonial' capitalism toward a 'globalised/computerised/service' capitalism. This process has deeply damaged and disoriented the labour movement – nationally, regionally, internationally.

Trade unions have seen their traditional membership base reduced, divided, individualised and dispersed. Unionism was once, and sometimes still is, a social movement, acting as a democratic force, with an alternative vision of the world. But, in much of our contemporary world, labour is finding itself outflanked here by the human rights, women's, ecological, peace and other such new radical-democratic and internationalist social movements. In other cases labour has seen a significant part of its traditional class base fall into the hands of authoritarian nationalist, racist or religious movements.

Traditional labour ideologies – communism, social democracy and populism (or radical-nationalism) – are declining along with the national/industrial/colonial capitalism they originally related to.

The crisis has had an even more

Unions and labour activists are rethinking and re-strategising at the international (or regional) level to confront globalisation and strengthen organisation. Peter Waterman analyses how this is being done and suggests ways to strengthen internationalism.

disorienting effect on the international trade union organisations. They had chugged along quite satisfactorily – until a globalised neo-liberalism ripped up the old national railway tracks. They confined themselves to the traditional ideologies, or to inter-union membership and influence battles (particularly in the third world). Or they buried themselves in ritualised conferencing, lobbying and committee work – dialoguing with international organs of capital and/or state – that were then quite prepared to do business with them.

This sorry international scenario continues for a large part today. But over the past two or three years we have begun to see a revival of labour internationally. Or, rather, a revival of international labour and of labour internationalism. Indeed, it even seems to be the case that unions are

rethinking and re-strategising at the international (or regional) level. It is those parts of the labour movement most involved in work at the international level, or in international solidarity, that have most seen the need for confronting and surpassing a neo-liberalised globalisation.

The response can be found most immediately in a number of international labour conferences taking place in 1999-2000, as we move from one millennium to another. The first is represented by the Conference on Organised Labour in the 21st Century (COL21). It is hosted by the ILO, and co-sponsored by the ILO and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU).

The second is a whole series of events initiated by trade unions, socialist parties, or left academics. These are new forces on the international union scene, mostly on the geographical or political margins of the traditional internationals. Here we find the Conference of the Southern Initiative on Globalisation and Trade Union Rights (Sigtur), hosted by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), October 25-29, 1999.

It is possible that a new kind of internationalism will emerge out of one or both of these types of events. This new kind of internationalism would be one that:

- returns to unions' social movement origins;
- and then adapts its social movement origins to a new millennium and the new world disorder of a globalised and computerised capitalism.

But this is only possible if labour, left and socialist activists respond critically to these new developments and engage energetically with/in them.

Which millenium?

COL21 is an international, trilingual,

electronic conference. It is open in principle to anyone with the motivation and the means (a computer with worldwide web or email access). It began in 1999 and it identified the following for discussion:

- employment and development;
- law and unions;
- responses to globalisation;
- unions and structural adjustment;
- collective bargaining and social dialogue;
- informal sector and marginalised workers;
- social protection;
- recruitment and organising;
- political strategy (relations with parties and NGOs);
- women;
- youth;
- union structures and services.

This agenda is ambitious and relevant. Several hundred people have already contributed, and many have enthusiastically discussed the value of 'social clauses' (in inter-state and global trade agreements) to the labour movement. The initiative is, however, also potentially limited by certain ideological, institutional or even electronic parameters.

Ideological parameter

Five initial declarations or analyses mark the beginning of COL21. Two are by the leaders of the convening organisations, three by European Union labour specialists. With one exception, these statements confine themselves to:

- the framework of liberal/social democracy;
- the existing international institutions of labour representation (for example the ICFTU);
- the existing international institutions of negotiation and norm-setting (for

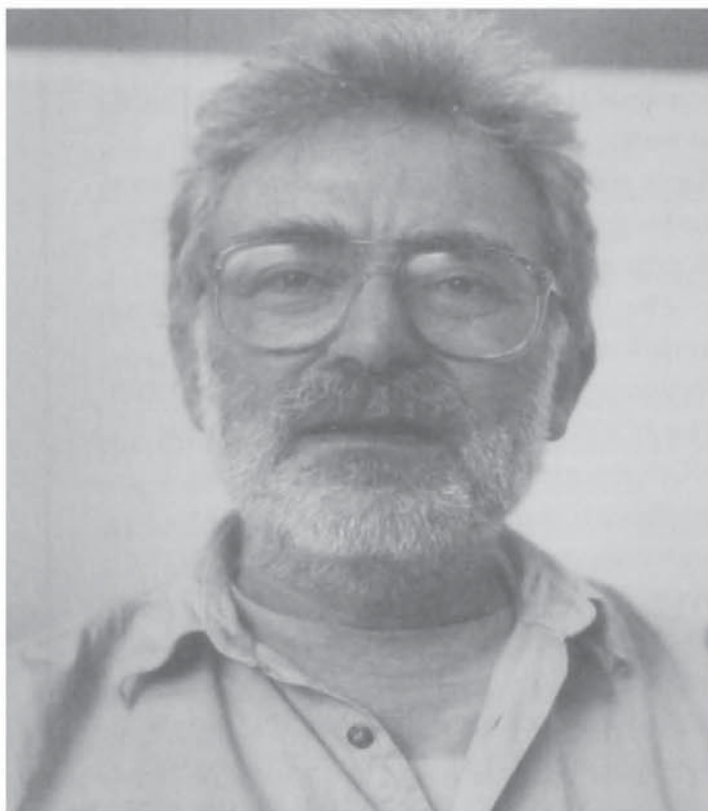
example the ILO);

- *the existing formal process and rituals for the advancement and spread of labour representation, negotiation, and norm setting (collective bargaining, tripartism, legislation, development co-operation, etc).*

What comes out of the initial declarations is some notion of a Paradise (or paradigm?) Lost. That paradise is some 1970s model (or myth) of Swedish or Dutch labour relations. Yet even this model was national and could not be applied in other parts of the world. It also, of course, left labour and society without relevant weapons to face the beast of neo-liberalism when it struck.

The exception amongst COL21's five limited opening statements is the input made by Richard Hyman, a British socialist professor of industrial relations. His point of reference and address is the labour movement rather than industrial peace, development or tripartism. He seeks solutions within the labour movement itself and its allies to the global crises. His central argument is that labour needs to begin a new battle of ideas. Labour can do this by entering the institutional/ideological terrain of the new workplace and processes, revealing their contradictions, and bending them to worker interests. He proposes a new labour project, which addresses:

- flexibility (for, not of, the labour force);
- security (of collective employment);
- opportunity (for personal advancement);
- democracy (its extension to the workplace and its generalisation);
- community (those amongst whom workers live or identity with);
- solidarity (a new solidarity that recognises and values national, cultural



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and other differences).

Hyman reconnects the present and future unionism to its origins, and to a broader social and international history. Hyman's is a welcome voice. But has he posted it to the right address? Will it be heard and discussed within a forum hosted by the ILO, and sponsored by the ILO and the ICFTU?

Institutional parameter

Both the ILO and the ICFTU are suffering something of an identity crisis. This is a result of the revolution within capitalism that tends to undermine and/or circumvent them. Both the ILO and the ICFTU are products of the national/ industrial/colonial stage of capitalist development. Both were products of massive (inter)national social movements, conflicts and consequent world wars. They could also be seen as having offered a cosmopolitan, reformist and *successful* alternative to the Communist International

and revolutionism. But both the ICFTU and the ILO are literally *international* in the sense of their constituents being defined in terms of nation-state identity. Jointly these institutions have expressed a liberal-and-social-democratic project of bipartite or tripartite labour relations.

The ILO and ICFTU were marginalised, in different ways, during the United Nations-sponsored Social Summit of 1995. The ICFTU found itself defined as one NGO amongst many, rather than the privileged representative of the poor. It was reduced to publicly arguing that the event should have been run by the ILO, or on ILO lines. This would have put labour proudly on the podium, as a *partner of* capital and state, dominating the 'single issue' NGOs. Yet since the ICFTU is, for 40% of its activity, dependent on the same Western state-controlled funding as the development NGOs, it should surely be discussing such issues amongst them, rather than preaching from on high.

Given all the above, it seems reasonable to speculate that the ICFTU and ILO are jointly concerned to restore their 20th century organisations as the central international institutions of labour representation, dialogue, compromise and norm-setting for the 21st century. They do not seem to question whether they should be re-inventing themselves for the new millennium.

Communicational parameter

Participation in COL21, after just a week or so in August 1999, was impressive, in terms of numbers (462 signed up, almost 100 introductions/contributions). It was also impressive in terms of respondents' interests and backgrounds. I had expected the response to be strongly skewed toward the US and UK, and the usual on-line suspects - young, white, male, professional, northern. A rule-of-thumb

analysis, based on some 48 contributions, spread over four days in late-August, revealed the following: 43 were from core capitalist countries, mostly North American; 44 were from males; 25 were from union activists or employees and 25 from academics (the last two being often overlapping categories); 12 were from pro-labour NGOs; 16 appeared more oriented toward collective bargaining; 26 were concerned with international labour issues.

It would be easy to dismiss such participation, as limited to the usual suspects. I prefer to take note of it as qualifying the open and international nature of the event, whilst stressing its radical potential. This lies in the number of academically-qualified/employed and union-oriented/allied participants concerned with the future of labour under conditions of globalisation. Moreover, the marginal presence of women and people from the capitalist periphery, is not the end of the story. This is not, after all, an election - it is a discussion and even, possibly, a dialogue. We *could* end up with a lot of white, northern, pro-labour academic guys talking to each other (about the implications of globalisation for anglo-saxon-type labour relations, and their European or international projection). But the weight readers accord a particular contribution is not determined by its representativity but by its perceived relevance.

We have yet to see how the ILO understands and uses the contributions. This forum is, after all, created for the purposes of the sponsors. But the initial participation is potentially more radical than these bodies have demonstrated themselves to be. And the parameters of an electronic forum are more open than those of an academic or trade union conference or publication. Individual

contributions, indeed whole discussions, could, in principle be reproduced in some more activist-oriented web page.

Which dialogue?

Now, there has been a flood of activist-oriented labour conferences on globalisation, planned either for the end of the old millennium or the beginning of the new. I have identified several, which have taken place, are taking place, or are expected to take place, in Brazil, the US (two), South Korea and Bangladesh, as well as in South Africa itself. We will have to await reports and analyses of their outcomes before we can compare and contrast. But the fact of their occurrence, their overlapping sponsorship and participation, their frequently overlapping agendas, and their networking origin or mode of operation, all suggest that the movement is being put back into the international labour movement! The conferences include:

- *The 2nd World Meeting Against Globalisation and Neo-liberalism*, organised September 1999 by Brazil's major trade union centre, the Central Unica dos Trabalhadores (CUT).
- *The Open World Conference in Defence of Trade Union Independence and Democratic Rights* to be held February 2000 in San Francisco.
- *LabourMedia99*, in Seoul, November 1999, the second such international labour communication conference/festival to be hosted in South Korea.

The Sigtur conference certainly overlapped with the previous events in sponsorship, attendance and concerns. It struck, however, a number of quite original notes. Its 'South' was not confined to the capitalist periphery, since the initiative came as much from Australia, as from South Korea, India or South Africa.

Moreover, it has received the blessing of a number of International Trade Secretariats

(ITSSs). A Southern 'identity', moreover – a recognition of the South as a focus of labour exploitation and resistance, affecting all workers – was urged on unions outside any geographical or social South. The initiative was considered complementary to, not competitive with, the established international unions: 'it creates space and meets needs'.

The agenda was itself innovatory, with the intention to focus on commitments to relevant action by participant unions within a specific time period. The first full day highlighted an Australian (and international) campaign against the mining multinational, Rio Tinto, that also involved communities, the human-rights and ecological movements. The second day dealt mainly with workplace and national union responses to the affects of globalisation, in terms of organising strategies to regain members, reach out to new types of workers and to relevant communities. The third day concentrated on 'building global unionism', as exemplified by a co-operation agreement signed on the spot between the unions covering two ports with a recent history of solidarity (Durban, South Africa and Fremantle/Perth, Australia). It also proposed a common international May Day for the year 2000 (quite a challenge considering May Day's decline in the North and its often nationalist character in the South). In the mind of Rob Lambert, its South African/Australian co-ordinator, there lies within the Sigtur conference an express aspiration for a 'global social movement unionism' (see *SA Labour Bulletin* vol 23 no 5, 1999).

Sigtur is, evidently, only one of several networks pioneering labour-oriented dialogues on labour internationalism. The outcomes (printed, practical) of Sigtur will require comparison with those from other conferences. This does not mean that Sigtur

is in competition with either the 'more institutionalised' fora (like that of the International Chemical, Energy and Mineworkers Federation, which followed immediately in Durban, South Africa). Nor is it in competition with the 'less institutionalised' fora (like the Open World Conference forthcoming in the US). It is going to be involved in a dialogical and dialectical process involving all these. Or, perhaps, one should say, it needs to see itself as thus engaged. Nor, finally, does it mean that Sigtur (or other initiatives) will book success at shopfloor, grassroots or community level. This is, after all, where workers live - and die - and which we have to reach if we are to attract and motivate workers to become internationalists. We can also not assume that the models of internationalism Sigtur demonstrated, or the actions it proposed, will be implemented by its participants or spread globally.

Sigtur, moreover, like the other labour-oriented events or networks, has another limitation. Being 'real' rather than 'virtual' (existing in computerised form, within 'cyberspace'), it will directly affect those who attended, but is less likely to reach those who did not attend.

There is here an interesting paradox. I only got to know of these 'real' events because of the worldwide web. But they have here an extremely restricted presence and impact. They appear, or become accessible, only via electronic discussion lists and (personal) electronic mail. They do not have their own websites (a kind of continually updated electronic magazine and resource tool). A lack of 'virtuality', at least for internationalist movements today, seems to me to be an increasing restriction on their 'reality'.

Inside, outside

A new kind of labour movement and internationalism, a 'global social movement

unionism', cannot today be built alone - or even initiated - by *one* particular organisation (trade union, labour-support organisation), according to *one* particular ideology (radical, reformist), by *one* particular category (industrial workers, working women, left intellectuals), from *one* particular place (US, Latin America, Asia-Pacific). Those interested in forwarding this project therefore need to be working, or at least thinking, both 'inside' (within traditional international labour or left organisations) and 'outside' (within the increasing number of internationalist networks, coalitions and alliances). The latter simply 'create space and meet needs'. They do not substitute for unions - which represent the largest organised international resource for a radical-democratic global solidarity project.

Every reason, therefore, for computer-skilled labour internationalists (particularly outside the white, male, Northern, etc, category) to take active part in the ILO/ICFTU event and themselves test the parameters suggested above. And every reason, on the ILO/ICFTU side, to ensure that at least the outcome of these events are made available on or through its own site.

And, in so far as the Sigtur co-ordinators wish to be accessible and influential worldwide, every reason for them to ensure that they have their own website (or pages on someone else's). And, since we cannot assume that ILO/ICFTU knows or cares about their existence, every reason to post their analyses and proposals on the COL21 site. ★

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